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SUBJECT: EU COMMISSION SHARK ACTION PLAN

¶1. (U) Summary: The European Union adopted an Action Plan outlining policy for sustainable management of sharks within the EU on February 5, 2009. The Action Plan is meant to address a wide variety of issues pertaining to the fishing, processing, sale, and study of sharks in the European Union, and contains language meant to promote regional cooperation and implementation of proposed regulatory initiatives. The plan has been forwarded to the Parliament and the Council in the hope that negotiations will be concluded in the first half of 2009. End summary.

¶2. (U) Despite their known vulnerability to overfishing, sharks and related species (rays, chimaeras) have been increasingly exploited in the past few decades - between 1984 and 2004, the most recent year with data available, commercial shark catches rose by an estimated 210,000 tons, from 600,000 to 810,000. Thousands of sharks annually are also caught accidentally in tuna-catching long lines and other non-shark commercial fishing operations. Sharks are also "finned," that is caught and killed exclusively for their fins, further contributing to population decline. As a food product, shark fillets and steaks are widely consumed in many EU Member States, notably Italy, the UK, Germany, France, and Spain. Fins are largely exported to Asian markets. Shark byproducts are also processed for use in commercial pet food, and shark oil and cartilage are also sold in non-food markets.

¶3. (U) Unveiling the new action plan, Commissioner for Maritime Affairs Joe Borg said:

"Sharks are very vulnerable to overexploitation and the consequences of depleting their numbers may have very serious consequences not only for sharks but also for marine ecosystems and for fishermen themselves. That is why we have set out a plan of action today which will both establish a more precautionary approach to managing fisheries where sharks are caught, and support the substantial research still needed to understand fully the role sharks play in the life of our oceans and the impact which fishing may have on them."

Certain NGO groups are not quite as impressed, with Aaron McLoughlin, head of the WWF's European Marine Program, noting that "The plan lacks a solid commitment to seek mandatory collection of data on shark catch, a critical element if the EU is to succeed in the conservation of these species."

¶4. (U) Major initiatives suggested in the EU Plan include provisions outlawing fishing in certain areas considered sensitive for endangered stock, stronger implementation of EU-wide shark finning bans, establishment of catch limits, increasing selectivity of fishing gear, changing regulations on shark discards to reduce unwanted shark by-catching, minimum commercial size, and promoting programs to increase accuracy and efficiency of relevant data collection and scientific study mechanisms. Regulations have been proposed at both the EU-wide and Member State level, with language encouraging cooperation with regional fishery organizations

to ensure full implementation.

¶5. (U) The plan will now be sent to both the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The Commission will also discuss their contents with Member States and regional fishery organizations. EU officials currently hope to see negotiations on this policy package completed in the first half of 2009, before Parliament and the Commission break ahead of the EP Elections and the expiration of the Commission's mandate. Once agreement is reached, work will begin on drafting legislative proposals.

¶6. (U) For more information, refer to DG Maritime Fisheries Main Page:

<http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries>

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